

Remarks on Lighting the National Christmas Tree

December 9, 1993

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to begin my remarks by asking that we recognize the years of devotion that Joe Riley has given to this Pageant of Peace. Let's give him a big hand. [Applause]

This has been a wonderful night for Hillary and for Chelsea and for me. I thank Sandy Duncan for doing such a wonderful job in her tennis shoes; I think she looked sort of graceful limping out there. The DC Choral Kaleidoscope was wonderful. And I think Willard Scott is a perfect Santa Claus. You know, he will take any excuse to wear hair. [Laughter] But he looked beautiful. I'm especially glad to see my friends Charley Pride and Phil Driscoll. I thank them for being here. I thought they were terrific, as was the Air Force Band that I'm proud of as the President very, very much. Thank you all so much for what you've done.

In this Pageant of Peace we come together in the spirit of our better selves, wishing that somehow, some way, we could feel the way we feel tonight and in this Christmas season, every day, all year long. We are joined by simple and universal convictions: a shared faith, a shared joy, a shared commitment now to follow the directions of our faith, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be grateful for what we have, to wish that others had it, and to take some time to give more of ourselves to others.

I ask tonight that all of us, each in our own way, express our gratitude to the men and women of our Armed Forces who are overseas in this Christmas season, to all those who serve us here in the United States, to our families and friends, and to all those to whom we could give a little something extra.

But most of all, because of all the difficulties we have had in the United States in these last couple of years, with violence in our own land affecting not only adults but more and more of our children, I ask tonight, at this Pageant of Peace, that we pray in this Christmas season that we be given the wisdom and the courage, the heart, the renewed sense of common humanity, to do what we can to bring more peace to the streets, the homes,

and the hearts of our own people and especially our children. That is something that would be perfectly consistent with the faith and the life we celebrate tonight, something we could take out of this Christmas season that would be the greatest gift we could ever give to ourselves, to our children, and to our beloved land.

Thank you. God bless you all. And now I'd like to ask my family to come up and help me to light the Christmas tree.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:50 p.m. on the Ellipse. In his remarks, he referred to entertainers Sandy Duncan, Willard Scott, Charley Pride, and Phil Driscoll.

Remarks in a Telephone Conversation With the Space Shuttle Endeavour Astronauts and an Exchange With Reporters

December 10, 1993

The President. Hello?

Col. Richard O. Covey. Hello, sir.

The President. Can you hear us?

Col. Covey. Yes, sir, I can hear you loud and clear.

The President. Well, the Vice President and I wanted to call you and congratulate you on one of the most spectacular space missions in our history. We're all so proud of you, and we've been able to see you do all those things. It's just been wonderful, and I want to thank each and every one of you for what you've done. You made it look easy.

Col. Covey. Well, we appreciate the thanks and congratulations, sir. That's nice, particularly coming from you. As you know, great adventures are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, and the seven of us were lucky to be able to be part of this great adventure.

The President. I know that you know this, but you have really both educated and inspired people all over the world. I don't think any of us will ever forget the image of K.T. lifting the damaged solar panel over her head and then letting it go. That was a moment of high drama. Maybe you should come down here and help us stage our events on Earth. [Laughter]

Mission Specialist Kathryn C. Thornton. I think it's easier to throw away solar panels. [Laughter]

The President. I'm glad the press corps heard you say that. [Laughter]

[At this point, the Vice President offered his congratulations to the Astronauts and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.]

Dr. F. Story Musgrave. I'm Story Musgrave, sir. I'm one of the EVA group members. As you can see now, we've got some different colors here. The magenta, I guess you call it, are the space walkers, and the ones up front there in navy blue, they're the ones that took care of us and launched us, took care of us during the space walks, and will bring us back home.

What it took was incredible attention to detail and an incredible amount of energy to identify what surprises might come up and try to assure that we would get the job done, an immense amount of training. But I think it did, and the challenge was a very, very ambitious mission to restore Hubble, to fix the spherical aberration, to restore Hubble so it will be good for many, many more years of science. A very ambitious mission, but it did take the kind of stuff that we have, and it's mostly attention to detail, identifying surprises, turn over every stone, and give it all of the energy we've got.

The President. It also took at least one person who is making his fifth journey into space. You can't imagine what a wonderful picture you are there. You and the two men behind you proved that you can walk in space with or without facial hair. [Laughter] I tell you—Yes, well—and he's both.

Another thing that you did, I believe, to follow up on what the Vice President was saying, I think you gave an immense boost to the space program in general and to America's continuing venture in space. In this last session of Congress, we had quite a struggle to preserve the space station and an adequate ongoing budget for NASA because we were cutting so much else. I'm really gratified that we were able to do it, and I hope that this stunning example of what can be accomplished will really reinforce the support for America in space, both in the Congress and

in the country. I think it will. All of you were just absolutely wonderful.

[At this point, the Vice President welcomed the member of the team from Switzerland and stated that his involvement is symbolic of the international nature of today's space program.]

Mission Specialist Claude Nicollier. Well, I feel very privileged to have been selected for this mission as a representative of the European Space Agency. As you know, the European nations participated in this program, in the design and the manufacture and the exploitation of the scientific results, and I feel really very privileged and happy to have been selected as a crewmember, as the foreign crewmember of this mission.

The President. Let's see, who have we not heard from? The rest of you have to talk. There's somebody back home looking for you.

Col. Covey. Well, I was a little bit remiss, sir, and I didn't introduce all of the crew. You just heard from Claude Nicollier, the other member of the orbiter crew who did a lot of the mechanical arm flying. Along with Claude was my copilot, Ken Bowersox on my right here. And the other EVA crew members, besides K.T. and Story are Tom Akers on my far left and Jeff Hoffman behind me. I'm sure they would all like to make a statement, then I'll let Sox start off.

Comdr. Kenneth D. Bowersox. Yes, sir, I just wanted to say I'm proud to be from a country that supports efforts like this. I think space exploration reflects the continuing pioneering spirit of the American people, and I think it's something we can all be proud of.

Mission Specialist Jeffrey A. Hoffman. Hello, Mr. President. Thanks for your congratulations. Of course, for every one of us seven up here, there are literally hundreds of people on the ground, on the ground team who have put just as much effort and energy and talent into this mission to make it a success as we have. And they not only deserve the credit for it, but we sure wish they could be up here with us.

Dr. Musgrave. Mr. President, I think that this mission is unique in another way, and that is that it has really combined two aspects

of space exploration. It has joined the use in space for scientific exploration—which the Hubble telescope is so exciting, and everyone in the astronomical community and all over the world is waiting to see the results now of the newly refurbished Hubble—and it's joined that with the human space program. And this is very exciting, and I think it is only the first part of showing what people and machines and scientific exploration and human ingenuity can do in the environment of space.

The President. Well, thank you all. Let me just say again that we are all so proud of you, and I appreciate what each and every one of you have said. It's a real clear message about not only your incredible abilities and your courage and the support you got from all of those hundreds of people helping you back down here but of the profound importance of our country continuing its adventures in space. We depend on it down here for so much scientific knowledge, and we're going to do what we can do to support you and to support NASA and to support the space program. And you have taken an enormous step forward for building that kind of support, not just in the minds but in the hearts and the spirits of the American people. And you've done it with great good humor. And we thank you so much.

The Vice President. Thank you, a wonderful, inspiring success story.

Col. Covey. Well, we truly appreciate those words, and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us now and also for taking the time to be supportive of our Nation's space programs. It's very important to us, and I can't tell you how proud we are to be able to represent those programs and to be able to help bring NASA back to new heights if we can do that.

The President. You already have. Thanks.

Astronauts. Thank you.

The President. Good luck.

[At this point, the telephone conversation ended and the President answered reporters' questions.]

Space Program

Q. Mr. President, do you believe that this flight was a make-or-break effort for NASA?

The President. I don't know about that. I think that this flight's success will plainly illustrate the importance of NASA's many missions and reinforce the understanding of that importance in the American people and the support for it.

The Vice President. It's just the pressurization. [Laughter]

The President. I thought it was someone hissing at my response. [Laughter]

Q. Is it a new lease on life for the space program?

The President. Well, I think the space program got a new lease on life in this last session of Congress after the completion of the Best report and the redesign of the space station and Congress reaffirming the support for the space station. And then the support we've achieved, at least from the leadership, the appropriate committees in Congress, for the Russian participation in the whole continuing vision of the space station, I think that was very important. But this probably will galvanize the public's imagination and support again in a way that nothing we could have ever done in this town would have accomplished.

Gun Control

Q. Sir, on a more down-to-earth issue, are you ready to fully endorse this idea of gun ownership licensing and registration?

The President. Well, as I said, there are a whole lot of different ideas that have been advanced in this whole area, including a much better oversight of people who actually sell weapons in the country and a whole series of things on that. That's a question of Federal registration, as well as some State and local registration, too, at least for over-the-counter sales. And there are any number of other issues.

Keep in mind, I keep saying we have to do these things one at a time. The crime bill with the amendment by Senator Feinstein which passed the Senate has not yet passed the House. That's a very important step because that will be a measure of the willingness of the Congress to move forward here in banning some of these assault weapons. But another big step will be getting the Federal Government, the Treasury Department, ATF, the capacity to define identical assault

weapons that may not be mentioned by name in the law but that are the same thing with just some minor modification to try to get around the law. In other words, there are a whole set of issues here that I believe we have to look at and make decisions on and then set up a set of priorities based on how much we can get done how quickly.

On the issue of the registration of either the guns themselves or the people who own them, you know, in the question of automobiles we have both people registered, you know, people have an automobile license, and the cars themselves are registered. And that's all done at the State level, but a lot of the information is in national computers for law enforcement purposes. For example, if someone steals your car today and drives it to another State and leaves it in the parking lot of a shopping center and it's found, the license number could be fed back into the computer, and you could be told within a matter of a few seconds, normally, that your car's been turned up and where it is. So what I am doing now is to ask the Justice Department to work with our staff to analyze all these proposals both on the merits, if it's right or wrong, and secondly, for the details, how could it be done, and thirdly, what should we do in what order. And that's what I'm looking at now.

The main thing I can tell you is that we are committed to going further. The Brady bill was a good first step. It will save some lives, especially for people who have established records of mental problems or clear criminal records. But it is nowhere near enough. It is the beginning, and we have got to move forward.

Q. The North Koreans——

The President. You heard my answer. I just think it is very important that we know exactly what we're talking about: How would it be done? What are the mechanics? How does it rank in order of priority with these other things we have to do, both in terms of what's most urgent, number one, and number two, what can we most likely get done quickest?

And let me just emphasize, if you look, there was a study in one of the papers just in the last 10 days on the deaths of young people by gunshot in one of our major cities

which concluded that the increase in the death rate was attributable over a brief period of time, like over the last 5 years—we're not talking about 20 but over the last 5 years—entirely to the dramatic increase in the use of semiautomatic assault weapons as opposed to single-shot guns. That single thing had raised the death rate in the last 4 or 5 years more than any other thing.

So, there are lots of issues here. We're going to try to deal with them all in an aggressive and forthright way, but we have to figure out exactly what to do and in what order. The possibility of movement here has just opened up, and the American people need to keep the pressure on, and we'll keep moving.

North Korea

Q. Mr. President, the North Koreans seemed pretty inflexible yesterday in their statement about their offer being "take it or leave it." Is there more flexibility in private than they're showing in public?

The President. Well, let me just say we have some hope for the continuing discussions. When negotiations are going on, I'm always reluctant to characterize them one way or the other, whether it's GATT or with North Korea. I just don't want to do that. But if you've asked me, have I given up on the discussions, the answer to that is no. We're aggressively pursuing them.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:37 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Interview on "The Home Show"

December 10, 1993

Gary Collins. The President of the United States, ladies and gentlemen.

The President. Gary.

Sarah Purcell. Hello, Mr. President, how are you?

The President. How are you? Glad to see you.

Ms. Purcell. Pleasure to meet you.

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Purcell. Thank you. Welcome to your own home.

The President. Here we are.